

1 From Slavery to Freedom

Slavery was a system designed to provide a permanent labor supply to develop the New World. Efforts to enslave Indians were not successful, for they could not adjust to labor in captivity and often escaped into the familiar terrain of the forest. Free white laborers were scarce and were unwilling to work when cheap land was available. White indentured servitude was an important source of labor in some colonies, but with its limited term of bondage it could not meet the growing demand for workers. Negroes could be forced into slavery more easily than whites and, once enslaved, could not easily run away and mingle readily in strange surroundings. More important, slavery of blacks could be justified by the ideology of racism. A black skin connoted evil and inferiority; Negroes were said to be destined to be slaves by the "Curse of Ham." They were pictured as savages and infidels from a barbaric, dark continent without a civilization, and enslavement was adjudged an improvement in their way of life. As Winthrop Jordan points out: "Slavery could survive only if the Negro were a man set apart; he simply had to be different if slavery were to exist at all."¹

The first group of twenty Africans brought to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 were not slaves but indentured servants. But between 1660 and 1682, court decisions, special laws, and codes in all the colonies transformed the black servant into a slave. The slave codes generally provided that black people were to be slaves for life, that children were to inherit their mothers' condition, and that Christian baptism would not automatically assure freedom. They also prohibited marriage between whites and blacks and forbade bondsmen to acquire or to inherit property, to hold secret gatherings, to be parties to contracts or suits, to marry legally, or to engage in certain trades. Those who violated the slave codes were punished by a variety of means from fines to imprisonment, from whipping to death.

The number of black slaves grew slowly in the seventeenth century. By 1700 there were probably no more than 25,000 in colonial America. Thereafter, growth was rapid owing to the expansion of tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations in the South. Slavery was suited to plantation agriculture and to the Southern economy generally. Slave labor could be maintained at a subsistence standard of living, and the offspring of black women added to the profits of the masters.

Many of the Africans carried to America as slaves brought with them skills in metallurgy, woodworking, and leather. Slaveowners were quick to use these skills and to teach their bondsmen other trades associated with the operation of farms and plantations.

Only one city developed in the South during the colonial period—Charleston, South Carolina—and here slaves were used to perform skilled and unskilled labor, and slave craftsmen were even hired out. But it was in the Northern colonies, where agrarian development was diversified and the farmers' need for slaves was limited, that the use of slaves as artisans and craftsmen grew. A large number of slaves were employed in Northern cities as house servants, sailors, sailmakers, and carpenters. New York had a higher proportion of skilled slaves than any other colony—coopers, tailors, bakers, tanners, goldsmiths, naval carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, sailmakers, millers, masons, candlemakers, tobacconists, caulkers, cabinetmakers, shoemakers, and glaziers.

Throughout the colonial period free white craftsmen fought a losing battle to exclude blacks from most of the skilled trades; as early as 1707 free mechanics in Philadelphia complained of the "Want of employment, and Lowness of wages, occasioned by the Number of *Negroes* . . . hired out to work by the Day."² But they were challenging the right of slaveowners to use their property as they saw fit, opposing the men who dominated the colonial assemblies. Some restrictions were in fact imposed on the use of slave artisans, but they did not end the rivalry between slaves and white workers. In the North, where trade and manufacturing grew, slaves continued to move into the skilled trades in competition with white artisans, driving down wages. As a result, many white craftsmen and mechanics in the urban areas joined the movement to abolish slavery. The opposition of white workers to the continued competition of slave labor was an important factor in ending slavery in the North.

Many Americans, including some Southerners, believed that the spirit of the American Revolution, combined with the economic stagnation in tobacco, rice, and indigo planting, would force slavery to die out in the South, just as it was disappearing in the North. But in 1793 Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, and planters began to take acreage out of other crops and enter the cotton market. The demand for slaves grew. By 1800, they were selling for twice the price of 1790. Not even the prohibition by Congress of the importation of slaves from Africa after 1807 could keep cotton from becoming king. With big money to be made from planting cotton with slave labor or from breeding slaves for sale to the planters, the plantation system spread westward and slavery became solidly rooted in fifteen Southern states. By 1860 there were 4 million slaves in these states.

"Free Negro wage earners were members of the labor force before the Civil War," writes Philip Taft in his *Organized Labor in American History*.³ But from the time the first trade unions were formed by white workers in the 1790's to the Civil War—in which period the free black population grew from 59,000 to 488,000—no free Negro wage-earner was

a member. To be sure, the trade unions of the 1850's were exclusively craft unions composed of skilled mechanics. Unskilled workers found it impossible to join most of these unions, and several, such as the printers, hotel waiters, shoemakers, and tailors, excluded women as well. But not one of the unions allowed a black worker, skilled or unskilled, male or female, to join its ranks.

The short-lived Industrial Congress—a national organization of reformers and workingmen—did admit Negro delegates to an 1851 convention, but the Mechanics' Assembly of Philadelphia so resented the admission of blacks that it voted to sever all ties with the Industrial Congress. The Communist Club of New York, formed in 1857, required all members to "recognize the complete equality of all men—no matter what color or sex."⁴ But there is no evidence that this position had any effect on other labor societies.

Of nearly 500,000 free blacks in the United States in 1860, 238,268 were in the North and West. At one time they had occupied an important economic position; it is quite likely that in a number of Northern cities between 1790 and 1820 a large proportion, perhaps most, of the skilled craftsmen were blacks. Of course, most of them received less money than white artisans for the same work, but they at least found employment in their trades. The reason was that from 1776 to 1815 immigration from Europe had declined, leaving openings for free black artisans. But with the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 immigration to the United States started to flow once again, and immigrants from Europe, many with skills acquired in their native lands, flocked to this country and settled in its Northern cities. Industrial development also attracted native Americans from the farms to the city, where they soon acquired the skills necessary to meet the demand for labor.

By 1817 the supply of skilled labor, for the first time in the country's history, exceeded the demand. In the face of competition from skilled workers with white skins, many black artisans found themselves unemployed, and to survive skilled black workers had to accept unskilled, semi-skilled, and domestic work. Thus early in American history the black worker experienced being the first to be fired when the job market was tight.

By 1837 only about 350 of the 10,500 Negroes in Philadelphia, for example, pursued trades, or about one in every twenty adults. By 1849 the black population had increased substantially, but the number of black craftsmen had risen only to 481. By 1859, the number of black craftsmen had declined. On the eve of the Civil War Negro members of the labor force in Philadelphia were engaged in 400 different occupations, but eight out of every ten black male workers were unskilled laborers. Another 16 per cent worked as skilled artisans, but fully half of this group were barbers and shoemakers; the other skilled craftsmen were scattered among the construction, home-furnishing, leather goods, and metalwork trades. Less than half of 1 per cent found employment in Philadelphia's developing factory system. Finally, more than eight out of every ten black working women in Philadelphia were employed as

domestic servants. The 14 per cent who worked as seamstresses accounted for all the skilled workers among the black female labor force.

Before the 1840's and 1850's, black workers in many Northern cities had monopolized the occupations of longshoremen, hod-carriers, white-washers, coachmen, stablemen, porters, bootblacks, barbers, and waiters in hotels and restaurants. A huge influx of white foreigners, particularly after the Irish famine in 1846, caused a radical change. The unskilled Irish, in particular, pushed the Negroes out of these occupations, depriving many blacks of employment. "Every hour," Frederick Douglass, the most influential black leader of the nineteenth century, lamented, "sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived immigrant whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place."⁵ In November, 1851, the *African Repository* noted that in New York (and in other Eastern cities) it was no longer possible to see the Negro "work upon buildings, and rarely is he allowed to drive a cart of public conveyance. White men will not work with him."

Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo B. Greene, in their study of Negroes as wage-earners, state that "without a doubt many a Negro family in the free States would have been reduced to utter destitution had not it been for the labor of the mother as a washerwoman." Occasionally, according to John Hope Franklin, free Negroes found Northern society so opposed to their advancement that they voluntarily sold themselves back into slavery. "I . . . can't get work from no one," was the cry of one Cincinnati free Negro who could endure the "idleness and poverty" of his "freedom" no longer.⁶

"White boys won't work with me," the black youth cried in despair. "White men will not work with him," the reports on the conditions of colored people emphasized.

J. F. W. Johnston, an observant Englishman, wrote in the 1850's, following a tour of the Northern states: "Whenever the interests of the white man and the Black come into collision in the United States, the Black man goes to the wall. . . . It is certain that wherever labor is scarce, there he is steadily employed, when it becomes plentiful, he is the first to be discharged."⁷ Friction between white and black laborers heightened during rivalry for jobs in years of depression. It was intensified further by the use of blacks in place of striking laborers. Struggling for economic survival, blacks were forced to become scabs. The white workers retaliated not only by attacking the strike-breakers but by invading Negro ghettos, assaulting and killing black people, and destroying homes and churches in an attempt to force blacks to leave the city. Unskilled Irish workmen, themselves victims of nativist riots and anti-foreign and anti-Catholic elements, could usually be counted upon to join an anti-Negro mob. While competition for jobs between the Irish and blacks, both poverty-stricken, was a major cause of many anti-Negro riots, the mobs were often organized—and sometimes even led—by "scions of old and socially prominent Northern families" who had close economic and social links with the South, and who exploited fear of black competition to combat the Abolitionists.⁸

Frederick Douglass appealed to white employers to give blacks an opportunity to become apprentices and to work at trades once they had acquired skills; he pleaded with the labor organizations and labor papers to educate white workers on the value of unity in the struggle for a decent livelihood, regardless of race or color. When his pleas fell on deaf ears, Douglass came out in support of Negroes who took the jobs of striking white workers, blaming the whites for forcing the blacks to act as scabs as the only way to earn a livelihood. He wrote bitterly, "Colored men can feel under no obligation to hold out in a 'strike' with the whites, as the latter have never recognized them."⁹

The general situation in the antebellum South also spawned bitter hatred of blacks among many white workers, who blamed the Negro for the institution of which he was the principal victim. The white artisan resented the threat to his livelihood from the slave mechanic, and white industrial workers increasingly found themselves required to compete with black bondsmen. (By the 1850's, 160,000 to 200,000 blacks—about 5 per cent of the total slave population—worked in industry.) Some Southern white workers understood that their economic future was linked to the destruction of slavery, but most raised their objection not to slavery but only to the use of slaves in industrial occupations, especially the skilled crafts. They petitioned Southern legislatures to forbid slave competition, but only in a few cases were they successful.* Southern capitalists were usually able to take advantage of the availability of slave labor in both skilled and unskilled trades to keep down wages and curb attempts to form unions.

While there are numerous instances of labor unrest and even labor organizations in the South before the Civil War, several factors retarded the growth of organized labor, the most important being the slave society which dominated the South. In 1842 Chief Justice Shaw of Massachusetts in *Commonwealth v. Hunt* upheld the legality of the strike weapon. This decision cut no ice in the South, where courts continued to declare strikes illegal. A South Carolina judge, when sentencing twenty-three Irish construction workers to two months in prison for conducting a strike in 1855 against the use of slave labor to reduce wage scales, admonished white workers not to "make war upon the Negroes . . . for slaves are, preeminently, our most valuable property—their rights center in the master, which he will vindicate to the bitter end." When white workers at the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Virginia, went on strike to stop the increasing employment of slaves, they were prosecuted for "conspiracy" against their employer. They lost their battle and were never rehired. Thereafter, as Tredegar's chief executive noted, the company used "almost exclusively slave labor except as the

* As Robert Starobin notes: "White artisans did not seek to abolish slavery altogether, only to exclude Negroes from certain trades . . . the net effect of most protests by white artisans was thus not to weaken slavery but to entrench it more firmly in the southern city." Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 312-13.

Boss men. This enables me, of course, to compete with other manufacturers."

It also enabled him to keep unionism out of the Iron Works. Slave competition was thus the most important deterrent to the formation of effective trade unions in such slave states as Virginia, South Carolina, and even Louisiana, even though it did not prevent the establishment of some form of a labor movement and the spread of militant strikes. "With the blacks," wrote a mill owner in North Carolina, "there is no turning out for wages."¹⁰

Racism blinded the workers and diverted their enmity from the capitalists to the slaves, while at the same time the slaves were used to keep them in subjugation. Frederick Douglass, writing from personal experience as a slave field hand and craftsman, exposed the technique used by the slaveowners to maintain their dominance and pointed up the significance of racial prejudice:

The slaveholders . . . by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the blacks, succeeded in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black man himself. . . . Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers. The slave is robbed by his master, of all his earnings above what is required for his physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system, of just results of his labor, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages. At present, the slaveholders blind them to this competition, by keeping alive their prejudices against the slaves as *men*—not against them as *slaves*. They appeal to their pride, often denouncing emancipation, as tending to place the white working man on an equality with Negroes, and, by this means, they succeed in drawing off the minds of the poor whites from the real fact, that by the rich slave-master, they are already regarded as but a single remove from equality with the slave.¹¹

In 1860 there were more free blacks in the South than in the North—250,787 as against 238,268—mainly because in most Southern cities free Negro artisans were essential to supply the needs of the community. In Charleston, there were free blacks in highly skilled occupations—carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, masons, and butchers. "There are many callings in which the colored people have a decided preference," a Charleston Negro wrote in the *African Repository* of October, 1832, "and in some cases they have no competitors." Moreover, the children of free black craftsmen were able to learn a trade, usually through apprenticeship. Free black artisans were so important to the economy of many Southern cities that whites who valued their work resisted efforts to force them out of the state.

After 1850, the fear that urban surroundings would weaken their hold over slaves caused many slaveowners to restrict the use of bondsmen in cities. As the black population dropped, whites took over crafts formerly occupied by slaves and then turned to eliminating free black competition. With or without official sanction, and usually with violence, they forced blacks out of the better jobs, and in some cases out of cities altogether. (Slaveowners reminded the free blacks who were assaulted by white

artisans that the assaults were no threat to the institution of slavery, hence they saw no reason to protect them.) Still, many free blacks were able in the South to work at their trades and to hand on their skills to their children. In this respect, they were economically better off than their brothers in the North.

Nevertheless, the free Negro occupied a wretched social position in the South. To prove that he was not a runaway slave, he had to carry identification papers at all times. He could not vote, and in courts of law his testimony was not admissible in cases where white persons were parties. Free Negro artisans, unlike white craftsmen, were subject to special taxes; they could not form trade unions and were excluded from all unions that did exist in the South. Not even in New Orleans, the most cosmopolitan of Southern cities, with a large proportion of free black workers and a relatively strong trade-union movement, could free Negroes organize their own unions or join those formed by white workers.

Because of the fear of slave rebellions, free blacks were prevented by law from entertaining or visiting slaves.* In 1822, after the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy, South Carolina passed a law forbidding free black seamen to leave their vessels when in South Carolina ports. In 1829, after free Negro sailors had distributed a revolutionary pamphlet by David Walker, a free black tailor in Boston, calling upon the slaves to revolt, several slave states passed laws requiring that free Negro seamen be kept in jail until twenty-four hours before departure time.

In the North, racism was the basic reason for the black worker's deteriorating economic position. Whites, employers and workers alike, maintained a solid front against the black worker and successfully contained him within the menial job market. "To drive a carriage, carry a straw basket after the boss, and brush his boots, or saw wood and run errands, was as high as a colored man could aspire to," William Wells Brown, the black Abolitionist, noted.¹²

Alexis de Tocqueville observed on his visit to the United States in the 1830's that racial prejudice seemed to be stronger in the North than in the South and was most intense in the Western states, which had never known slavery. Only five states, all in New England, allowed the black man equal suffrage. In the West, Negroes were excluded from the public schools, and four states—Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Oregon—even

* A number of the leaders of the slave insurrections between 1790 and 1861 were artisans or industrial slaves. Gabriel Prosser, organizer of the conspiracy in Henrico County, Virginia, in 1800, was a blacksmith, while Nat Turner, leader of the great slave rebellion in Virginia of 1831, was a carpenter and millwright before he became a slave preacher. The great slave conspiracy organized in Charleston in 1821-22 was led by Denmark Vesey, a free black carpenter, and Vesey's recruits came mainly from the urban industrial slaves in Charleston. The slave conspiracy of 1856 involved hundreds of industrial slaves—sugar mill workers, lead miners, and ironworkers—in Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

The records of slave revolts reveal that, while these black workers could not organize and strike, they were eager to end their bondage by any means necessary and that they often received aid and cooperation from their free black brothers.

barred them from entering their territory. All over the North the blacks lived in a world segregated by both law and custom. Even in New England, the Negro was confined to menial occupations and subjected to constant discrimination. In the antebellum North there were Negro pews in the churches, Negro seats in the courtrooms, Negro balconies in the theaters, and separate and inferior schools for Negro children. Negroes were forced to live in the worst neighborhoods, were excluded from many public omnibuses, most streetcars, and the cabins of steamers (although they were permitted to travel on the exposed deck). They even had to be buried in separate graveyards. The American belief that "God himself separated the white from the black" was to be found everywhere, "in the hospitals where humans suffer, in the churches where they pray, in the prisons where they repent, in the cemeteries where they sleep the eternal sleep."¹³

Thus, from the cradle to the grave, the white worker, whether native-born or foreign-born, was taught to regard the Negro as an inferior. In a society in which racial prejudice was all but universal, it is hardly surprising that he refused to work with a black craftsman or laborer, believed that no black should receive the same wages and conditions as a white worker, and excluded blacks from his union. To work with a Negro in the same shop, even to travel with him on the same streetcar, was to mean a loss of social status. John Campbell, a Philadelphia typesetter, spoke for many white workers in his book *Negromania*, (1851):

Will the white race ever agree that the blacks should stand beside us on election day, upon the rostrum, in the ranks of the army, in our places of amusement, in places of public worship, ride in the same coaches, railway cars, or steamships? Never! never! nor is it natural or just that this kind of equality should exist. God never intended it.¹⁴

In at least one instance, however, white workers before the Civil War sought to improve relations with blacks in their trade. Negro waiters in New York were successful in 1853 in forcing their employers to pay \$16 a month at the same time that white waiters received \$12. In this exceptional situation the whites held a meeting to form the Waiters' Protective Union and to force equalization of their wages. While they did not open their ranks to blacks, the whites invited the leader of the Negro waiters to attend the meeting. The New York *Herald* of March 31, 1853, reported that "Mr. Hickman (colored) . . . said the colored men were the pioneers of the movement, and would not work for less than eighteen dollars a month." The paper quoted the black waiter as saying, to the cheers of the whites: "I advise you to strike upon the 15th of April for \$18 a month; and if the landlords do not give it, then you turn-out, and be assured that we will never turn in your places."

Denied the right to vote in most states, black workers could not exert political pressure to redress their grievances. Still, there is evidence that they tried to unite for protection and alleviation of their conditions. But such societies as the New York African Society for Mutual Relief,

founded in 1808; the Coachmen's Benevolent Society and the Humane Mechanics, organized in Philadelphia in the 1820's; and the Stewards' and Cooks' Marine Benevolent Society, established in New York in the 1830's, resembled fraternal lodges more than trade unions, emphasizing "the need to relieve the distressed, and soften the forms of poverty, by timely aid to the afflicted."¹⁵

Another type of organization in existence before the Civil War is exemplified by the American League of Colored Laborers, organized in New York City in July, 1850, with Frederick Douglass as a vice-president. Its main object was to promote unity among mechanics, foster training in agriculture, industrial arts, and commerce, and assist member mechanics in setting up in business for themselves. Clearly, the league was interested in industrial education rather than trade-union activity; moreover, its orientation was toward the self-employed artisan.

Still another type was the Association of Black Caulkers in Baltimore, formed in July, 1858. Caulking was of great importance in shipbuilding, because a ship was not fit for service unless it was insured against leakage. Before 1858, Negroes had completely monopolized the trade. But Baltimore, even though it was a slave city in a slave state, was a major industrial and commercial center and, unlike most other Southern cities before the Civil War, attracted immigrants. Beginning in 1858 Irish and German immigrants began a concerted effort to drive the blacks out of the caulking trade. When petitions to legislative bodies failed to achieve this objective, the whites resorted to violence. Riots between Negro and white caulkers began to occur in the early summer of 1858. To defend themselves and protect an occupation that had always belonged to them but was now in danger of being taken away, the blacks formed the Association of Black Caulkers. Their white rivals then formed their own society of caulkers. We do not know much about the black association, for it went out of existence when a local court ordered both societies of caulkers to dissolve. The white society refused to dissolve and even forced the owner of the leading shipyard to hire whites in place of blacks, conceding a few Negroes the right to work only after obtaining a permit from the president of the white society. Negroes continued to constitute a majority of the caulkers in Baltimore but were often attacked and beaten by whites, and a number moved to other seaboard cities in search of employment.

In the first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867, Karl Marx insisted that the self-interest of the working class as a whole required the liberation of the black slaves. He wrote: "In the United States of America, any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded."¹⁶ Twenty-one years earlier, the New England Workingmen's Association had used almost the same language when it resolved that "American slavery must be uprooted before the elevation sought by the laboring class can be effected."¹⁷ But not many white workers understood the truth of their principle as the nation moved to Civil War. Most believed that their

own struggles took priority over the emancipation of the slaves and feared the competition of freed slaves who might come North. Their employers, not the slaveholders, were their chief enemies.

To be sure, many workers were influenced by the Republican Party's stand against further extension of slavery in the territories and by its argument that only in a free economy, without slavery, could every man have an equal chance to succeed. The Party appealed to workers to understand that only through its program of free soil, free men, and free labor could they achieve economic independence. Workers who wanted free land for themselves realized that slave power was the chief obstacle to the realization of their dream, and they joined forces with others to resist the aggressions of the slavocracy by supporting the Republican Party. This trend accelerated in the late 1850's as fear developed in labor circles that the movement to extend slavery into the territories was only a prelude to the extension of slavery into the free states, leading finally to the reduction of the laboring class in the North to actual slavery. Republicans took pains to distribute among Northern workers literature quoting Southern designs to replace free labor in the North with slavery, such as the following editorial from a South Carolina paper: "Master and slave is a relation as necessary as that of parent and child; and the Northern States will yet have to introduce it. Slavery is the natural and normal condition of laboring men whether *white* or *black*."¹⁸

On the eve of the presidential election of 1860, the pro-Southern New York *Herald* appealed to Irish and German laborers: "If Lincoln is elected to-day, you will have to compete with the labor of four million emancipated negroes. . . . The North will be flooded with free Negroes, and the labor of the white man will be depreciated and degraded."¹⁹ Most workers, however, supported Lincoln because he promised a Homestead Act (free land) and a free economy where every man would have an equal chance to succeed. But the votes contributed by workers in the urban centers to Lincoln's victory in 1860 did not signify that they endorsed immediate emancipation. Following Lincoln's election, twenty-six trades with national organizations met in convention. Not one of them even mentioned slavery or abolition. To be sure, the German-American workers under the leadership of Joseph Weydemeyer, a pioneer American Marxist, protested "most emphatically against both black and white slavery," and the Communist Club of New York not only denounced human bondage but expelled any member who manifested the slightest sympathy for the Southern point of view. But they were the exceptions. The Workingmen of Massachusetts, meeting in Faneuil Hall in Boston in December, 1860, summed up the prevailing attitude of Northern workers:

We are weary of the question of slavery; it is a matter which does not concern us; and we wish only to attend to our business, and leave the South to attend to their own affairs without any interference from the North. The Workingmen of the United States have other duties.²⁰

Once the Civil War started, workers united in support of the Union. But as the war objective became increasingly to free the slaves in order to enable the North to win, the fear of Negro competition mounted in Northern white working-class circles, despite the shortage of labor in many Northern cities due to army enlistments and the reduction of foreign competition. Pro-slavery, pro-Southern Democratic and Copperhead newspapers incited white workers against the war and against blacks, exploiting not only economic fears but also racial antagonisms through vicious charges of Negro inferiority and accusations that the party of Lincoln was plotting to raise the black workers to the status of whites. On July 4, 1862, the Democratic Party of Pennsylvania denounced the Republicans as

the party of fanaticism or crime, whichever it may be called, that seeks to turn the slaves of the Southern States loose to overrun the North and enter into competition with the white laboring masses, thus degrading and insulting to our race and merit[ing] our emphatic and unqualified condemnation.²¹

At the time this statement was adopted, there were already strikes and labor riots in a number of Northern cities involving the Negro question. Opposition to the presence of black workers, who were accused of accepting lower wages than were paid to white workers, expressed itself in strikes against employers who used Negroes, and often in violence against blacks. In a number of instances, strikes and riots broke out over the hiring of Negroes at the same rates as whites, but usually the spark that provoked the outbursts was the fear that blacks, especially escaped slaves, by working for less, were displacing white workers.

Anti-Negro sentiment in Northern working-class circles grew even more bitter with the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. Lincoln's proclamation stirred fears of Negro competition to a new peak, stimulated by flaming editorials in the Copperhead newspapers predicting an influx of hordes of freed slaves into the factories and shops. Then came news of the proposed draft law, which would allow the rich to buy their way out of military service, and discontent among the workers soared. With new calls for volunteers producing fewer responses as the war progressed, Congress on March 3, 1863, passed legislation authorizing the first federal draft in United States history. The Conscription Act contained a clause that made it legal to evade service by providing a substitute or paying a \$300 commutation fee. Many capitalists, already prosperous from wartime profits, availed themselves of this provision.

The unfair provisions of the draft law, coming on top of inflation, profiteering, and speculation by capitalists, the breaking of strikes by the Union Army, hostile state legislation, and the competitive employment of Negroes, aroused the anger of many workers to the highest pitch. The Copperheads quickly took advantage of these conditions. They denounced through their press the provision that permitted all who "possess \$300 in 'greenbacks' filched from the *people*" to escape military service.

What would the workers fight for? the Copperheads asked. And they

replied: "to enable 'abolition capitalists' to transport Negroes into Northern cities in order to replace Irish workers who were striking for higher wages." It was true that, during strikes for higher wages since the Emancipation Proclamation, the use of Negro strikebreakers by employers became more frequent, particularly in the longshoremen's field dominated by the Irish. In 1863 a strike of 3,000 white longshoremen in New York failed because Negroes were hired to replace the strikers. Similar failures took place in Albany, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, and bloody rioting between Negro and Irish dock workers was quite frequent. The New York *Daily News*, a leading Copperhead paper, called it a strange perversion "to leave one's family destitute . . . while one goes to free the negro who being free will compete with him in labor."²²

On July 13, 1863, a few days after the opening of recruiting, a mob wrecked the main recruiting station in New York City. For three whole days the mob, with the longshoremen in the vanguard, roamed through the city, destroyed shipyards, railroads and street car lines, closed factories and machine shops, attacked the homes and offices of leading Republicans, and killed and wounded an undetermined number of Negroes. (For weeks after the draft riots, bodies of Negro dock workers floated in the East and Hudson rivers.) Before the riot was quelled, more than 400 had been killed and wounded, and property estimated at \$5 million in value had been destroyed.

The rioting spread to other cities—Newark, New Jersey; Troy, New York; Hartford, Indiana; Port Washington, Wisconsin—and into the mining districts of Pennsylvania. Everywhere Negroes were attacked, their homes sacked and burned, and thousands made homeless. Many blacks were driven out of jobs, despite years of service in a number of cases, and employers, fearing attacks by mobs, simply refused to employ Negroes in any kind of work.

Actually, those involved in the riots represented only a small part of the working class. But this was small comfort to the black workers who found that employers, even those who asserted that they would uphold the principle of the right of men to labor "without distinction of color," proved to be too timid to hire Negroes lest their shops be attacked or their entire working force quit. Commenting on this experience, William J. Watkins, a black lawyer, wrote in the *Christian Recorder*, official organ of the African Methodist-Episcopal Church: "Since the commencement of the rebellion, the spirit of caste has become tenfold more virulent and powerful than before. Colored men and women are being driven out of vocation after vocation. The determination of the white man is to starve us out."²³

During the draft riots in New York, white mobs attacked the Colored Seamen's Home, partly damaged the building, and forced black seamen and others in the home "to escape over the roof for their lives."²⁴ The home was the headquarters of the American Seamen's Protective Association (ASPA), a pioneer organization of Negro labor and the first seamen's organization of any kind or color in the United States. That it was

formed by Negro seamen is hardly surprising, since at least one-half of the 25,000 native American seamen who manned American vessels in 1850 were blacks. Many seamen were victimized by loan sharks and rent-gouging landlords while in port, and the ASPA was formed mainly to counteract these evils. It used the home as a shipping hall for black seamen, thereby eliminating some of the malpractices they were subjected to in port, but it does not appear to have functioned as an agent for dealing with their economic grievances on the job. Nevertheless, its founder, William M. Powell (born in New York City of slave parents), reported in the *New Era* on April 28, 1870, that the association had improved conditions for 3,500 colored seamen then in New York City who were earning aggregate wages of \$1,260,000 annually.

The ASPA was organized during the wave of unionization that began in the summer of 1862. While wages rose during the Civil War as a result of the labor shortage, prices rose more rapidly. (Between 1860 and 1865 wages rose 43 per cent, and prices 116 per cent.) Facing ever increasing prices and seeking to prepare for the expected contraction in employment in the postwar period, the labor force moved into unions. In December, 1863, the trade union directory of *Fincher's Trades' Review*, one of the leading labor papers of the day, listed only 79 local unions, representing 20 trades; by the end of 1864 the number of locals had grown to 207, and the number of trades had increased to 53; by November, 1865, approximately 300 locals representing 61 different trades were listed. Citywide trades' assemblies (into which local unions merged) also sprang up rapidly in the war period, and before the conflict was over there were more than thirty trades' assemblies established in every important industrial city in the country. The 1860's also saw the first large-scale development of national trade unions. In the ten years from 1860 to 1870 twenty-one new national unions were formed, with the largest number appearing during the 1863-65 period. At least 120 daily, weekly, and monthly labor papers were founded in those years, another indication of the revival of the labor movement.

As the war drew to a close, labor could point with pride to the fact that, despite Copperhead incitement, it had contributed immensely to victory over the Confederacy and to the ending of slavery. At the end of the war, the Senate estimated that between 500,000 and 750,000 men had left Northern industries to enlist in the Northern army. It is likely that more than 50 per cent of the North's labor supply served in the Union Army, but whatever the exact figure, more workers wore the blue uniform than members of other economic groups. Among them, though fighting in separate regiments and under white officers, were black workers. More than 186,000 Negro soldiers fought in the Northern armies, many of them escaped slaves, and their troops suffered 35 per cent more casualties than any other group.

When the war ended, labor served notice that in the future it would expect more of the wealth it had produced, "and a more equal participation in the privileges and blessings of those free institutions defended by their manhood on many a bloody field of battle."²⁵ In the name of the

workingmen of Europe, the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association (the First International) sent an address, penned by Karl Marx, urging the white workers in the United States to make certain, out of basic self-interest, to include black workers in their plans for the future. Congratulating them that "slavery is no more," the address added the following "word of counsel for the future":

An injustice to a section of your people has produced such direful results, let that cease. Let your citizens of to-day be declared free and equal, without reserve.

If you fail to give them citizens' rights, while you demand citizens' duties, there will yet remain a struggle for the future which may again stain your country with your people's blood.

The eyes of Europe and of the world are fixed upon your efforts at reconstruction and enemies are ever ready to sound the knell of the downfall of republican institutions when the slightest chance is given.

We warn you then, as brothers in the common cause, to remove every shackle from freedom's limb, and your victory will be complete.²⁶

Would labor, as it entered the era of Reconstruction, heed these words of wisdom?